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ABSTRACT

Comprehensive evaluations of two dropout prevention/reentry demonstration programs, sponsored by the Department of Education, one funded under the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP) and one funded under the Cooperative Demonstration Program (CDP), are provided in this paper. Both programs were designed to demonstrate effective strategies to encourage at-risk students to complete school or to reenter a high school equivalency program. Evaluation goals were to identify the extent of implementation success and implementation factors for success. The first part of the paper offers a brief descriptive profile of 25 programs, 15 SDDAP and 10 CDP. The evaluation design, which obtained data through document analysis, interviews, observation, and focus groups is described next. Findings indicate that program implementation can be enhanced by the following strategies: expanding existing programs rather than initiating new ones; correlating appropriate resource allocation with the particular implementation model; considering the local environment; and including a planning period in the implementation timeline. Two figures are included. (LMI)

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DROPOUT PREVENTION DEMONSTRATION PROJECTS:

FACTORS THAT AFFECT IMPLEMENTATION AND EFFECTIVENESS[1]

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The U.S. Department of Education (ED) is currently sponsoring comprehensive evaluations of two dropout prevention/reentry demonstration programs, one funded under the School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP) in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education (OESE), and the other funded under the Cooperative Demonstration Program (CDP) in the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE). Both programs intend to demonstrate effective strategies for encouraging at-risk children and youth to remain in and complete school or, for youth who have already dropped out of school, to reenter an educational program leading to a high school diploma or GED. Under SDDAP, grantees received funding for demonstration projects for a period of two years beginning in school year 1988-89; subsequently, ED added a third year of funding, with projects scheduled to end in spring 1991. Under CDP, grantees received funding for a three-year period, beginning in School Year 1989 and ending in spring 1992.

Organizations awarded grants to implement dropout prevention/reentry projects under these programs included school districts or consortia of districts, state education agencies, universities, community-based organizations, and a variety of other education organizations such as child service demonstration centers or intermediate service units. Under the specifications of the grant announcement for both programs, grantees were authorized either to replicate an existing dropout prevention/reentry model that had been tested and proven effective in other settings, expand an existing model that the grantee had already designed and implemented with other funds, or (for SDDAP projects) establish a new model of services based on analysis of the specific needs of at-risk children and youth in the community.

ED has funded two comprehensive program evaluations whose purpose is to assess the

[1]Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting, 7 April 1991.

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effectiveness of projects funded under these two demonstration programs in encouraging participants to remain in and complete (or return to and complete) their high school education. A key component of each evaluation is a detailed implementation study, whose purpose is to analyze factors that are conducive to successful project implementation and to identify those components of projects that appear to have positive effects on participant outcomes. The implementation analysis conducted for the SDDAP evaluation was cross-sectional in nature, with projects selected for in-depth study visited once, in spring 1990. The CDP evaluation is conducting a longitudinal implementation evaluation, with projects visited five times over a three-year period.

This paper provides preliminary findings from these two implementation components of the comprehensive evaluations. Key questions addressed include:

- To what extent have projects succeeded in implementing the project models they intended to implement?
- What implementation factors can be identified that appear to facilitate or deter improved participant outcomes?

To provide a context for our findings, we provide (1) a brief descriptive profile of the 25 projects included in the implementation analyses (15 in the SDDAP evaluation and 10 in the CDP evaluation), (2) an overview of the design of the two implementation studies, and (3) a discussion of preliminary findings.

Profile of the Implementation Sites

SDDAP

The SDDAP evaluation selected 15 of the 89 projects for "intensive" evaluation, including assessment of project implementation. Exhibit 1 provides an overview of the key characteristics of these projects. Six of the projects serve children in grades K - 5, while eight serve high school youth and one serves reentering dropouts who are either making up credits for graduation or working toward a GED. Two of the projects serve first graders exclusively: one has implemented an after-school whole language reading program, while the other has placed college students in the classroom to work individually with first graders to help them feel more comfortable about school.

Exhibit 2-1

Characteristics of SDDAP and CDP Projects in the In-Depth Studies

Project Characteristic	*Number*
Grade levels served	
K - 5	6
6 - 8	8
9 - 12	12
Reentry	2
Purpose of the grant	
Replicate a validated model	9
Expand an existing project	9
Establish a new project	9
Organizational structure	
After school/Saturday/extended day	4
Pull-out	6
Cluster/enrichment	3
Alternative school	10
School-within-a-school	3
Schoolwide project	1
Key services	
Academic remediation/GED prep	18
Counseling	12
Academic enrichment/innovative instruct.	7
Vocational education	6
Other employability-related activities	10
Parent component	4
Proactive attendance monitoring	4

Eight of the 15 projects were awarded grants to expand projects already in place. In terms of organizational structure, four serve participants outside the school day, three are pull-out, three have implemented a cluster or enrichment design, and three are alternative high schools. Twelve of the projects emphasize academic remediation (or GED preparation) as a key service, while eight provide group or individual counseling, and four have implemented academic enrichment activities. Four provide employability related activities--in two of these projects, students can "earn" part-time jobs as a reward for improved attendance and academic achievement.

Finally, as shown in Exhibit 1, most of the projects have articulated specific goals that supplement or expand the primary goal of dropout prevention. As might be expected most (13 in all) emphasize improvement in academic achievement. Others emphasize improvement in participants' self-esteem (one projects has this objective as its sole emphasis), increased parental involvement in their children's educational programs, and use of jobs as an incentive to increase participants' affiliation with school. Only two projects, however, have undertaken proactive strategies for improving attendance, although most projects do list improvement in attendance as a key project goal.

CDP

Because the demonstration projects funded under CDP are required to include a vocational component, they target services to high school students, where secondary vocational education is provided (see Exhibit 2). As noted, one of the projects targets services to youth who have already dropped out of high school. Nine of the projects intended to replicate an existing, tested model. Two grantees planned to replicate Project Coffee in a total of seven local sites. Coffee is an alternative school with an abbreviated school day that was originally developed to serve youth identified as seriously emotionally disturbed (SED) who were classified as special education students under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). One grantee intended to replicate the Peninsula Academies model by establishing Business Technology Academies in two high schools within one high school district. Two grantees planned to adapt a locally developed project model (one of which has been validated by the National Diffusion Network for special education students), while the final grantee in the evaluation is expanding existing services to at-risk youth.

Exhibit 2

Characteristics of CDP Implementation Projects[2]

Project Characteristic	*Number*
Grade levels served	
9 - 12	11
Reentry	1
Purpose of the grant	
Replicate a validated model	9
Adapt a locally developed project	2
Expand an existing project	1
Organizational structure	
Alternative school	7
School-within-a-school	2
Supplemental services	3
Key services	
Vocational education	6
Career awareness/employability devt.	6
Paid work experience	6
Academic remediation	6
Academic enrichment	3
Counseling	4
Incentives	8
Key ancillary goals	
Improvement in attendance (proactive)	2
Improvement in self-esteem	4
Improvement in self-management	3
Realistic post-school expectations	4

[2]Some of the projects participating in the evaluation are located in multiple sites. Thus, the number of individual sites is 12 rather than 10.

Consistent with these models, seven of our evaluation sites are in some sense "alternative" schools, two are schools-within-a-school, and three operate in the "regular" education setting, providing supplemental services to participants.

Half of the 12 project sites provide standard vocational education programs (i.e., a sequenced curriculum of occupational preparation in a specific area, such as welding, auto mechanics, or secretarial preparation). Six provide career awareness or employability development services rather than standard vocational education, and six have arrangements in place for participants to work at paid jobs, although only three sites initiated this component in the first year of their grants.

Six projects provide academic remediation (and one provides remedial assistance to participants in their vocational courses), and three have implemented academic enrichment components. Of the four sites that provide some form of counseling, one has implemented a well-organized group counseling component for all participants; the others offer more traditional "guidance" services. Finally, the four sites operating under a grant to a state board of vocational education provide monetary incentives for attendance. Project participants earn $1 per day for school attendance and a $5 monthly bonus if they miss no school during the month. Other projects offer more traditional incentives, such as field trips or pizza parties.

As with the SDDAP projects, the CDP demonstrations have developed "intermediate" goals to support the overall goal to reduce dropping out among at-risk youth. These range from activities to improve self-esteem (four projects) or self-management skills (three projects), to strategies to assist participants in developing realistic expectations and plans for their futures (four projects). Only two of the project sites have implemented proactive attendance monitoring components.

Overview of the Implementation Designs

In general, the designs for the implementation assessment components of the two evaluations are similar. Prior to field work, we analyzed available documentation for each of the selected projects to determine their principal characteristics along several dimensions, including (1) organizational location and context, (2) configuration of intended project components and services, (3) staffing and resources, (4) planning and schedule for

implementation, (5) strategies for identifying and recruiting participants, (6) staff training and support, and (7) linkages and coordination with other organizations, such as the private sector, other service providers, and the like. For the CDP projects, we developed an instrument that would permit us to measure the amount and quality of project implementation on these dimensions over time. For the SDDAP projects, which we were to visit only once, we omitted this component, whose purpose was, in part, to assess the projects' fidelity to their intended model over time and obtain detailed information on the nature and causes of adaptations. Since the SDDAP projects had already been operating for nearly two years, we were unable to capture adaptations they had made over time; thus we focused on what was in place at the time of the field work. We did, however, analyze the status of implementation in the context of the projects' services. For both studies, we obtained information on the configuration of services and on the relative "intensity" of those services in order to be able to explain participant outcomes.

Our field work design involved several different types of activities: (1) personal interviews with relevant administrative staff of the grantee, the project director, project teachers, counselors, and other staff as appropriate, and representatives of "linkage" organizations; (2) collection of information on school and community context, project monetary and other resources, staff training and experience prior to and following assignment to the project, and other information available about each project (e.g., annual self-evaluation reports); (3) detailed documentation of the "treatment" at the participant level; (4) classroom or service observations; and (5) focus groups with participants (for SDDAP projects only).

Preliminary Findings on Project Implementation

In this section we present some of our early findings on factors that appear to facilitate or impede project implementation across the 25 projects included in the two evaluations and describe some of the components of these projects that appear to be effective in encouraging participants to remain in--and affiliate with--school.

- *To what extent have projects succeeded in implementing the project models they intended to implement?*

As might be expected, in general the grantees whose plan was to expand an existing

project or adapt a locally developed model experienced greater early success in getting their projects started than did those whose intent was to replicate a validated model. Expansion of existing projects generally did not require identifying and hiring a new project director, locating new facilities, or major additions in equipment. Rather, these projects typically increased their service capacity by adding staff and were able to increase the numbers of participants they were able to serve, with minimal additional need for other changes. Similarly, several grantees either transported or adapted models with which they had extensive experience. For example, the grantee that replicated the Peninsula Academies model was the school district that first implemented this model. That district had in place two Academy programs that have been operating successfully for a number of years, and they initiated new Academies in two other high schools in the district. Thus, while they did need to arrange space, designate lead and other teachers, recruit students and private sector partners, the expertise for accomplishing these tasks was already in place. As another illustration, the grantee that adapted the locally developed special education model to meet the needs of at-risk students only needed to develop appropriate agreements with an area vocational-technical center that is housing the project and hire additional staff. In all of these instances, the requisite knowledge and experience were available, and project administrators had relatively little difficulty in getting underway.

Conversely, some grantees experienced considerable difficulty in replicating models about which they had little prior knowledge. Two grantees (a state board of vocational education and a university) won awards to replicate Project Coffee, in a total of seven local sites. Only one of the sites has implemented a project that would be recognizable to the originators of this model. A number of factors help to account both for the "success" and the early "failures." On the positive side, the successful replication was able (1) to attract a sizable amount of state funding to supplement the small CDP grant; (2) to obtain high-level district support for the project, which resulted in relaxation of state-mandated attendance requirements, modification of fairly restrictive student behavioral standards, and location of a facility to house the alternative school; (3) to attract a highly qualified and committed individual as project director, who subsequently hand picked staff based primarily on their experience with and commitment to serving at-risk youth.

The six sites that have experienced difficulty in implementing the model also offer some lessons about factors that might be anticipated--and perhaps averted--during the early stages of project operations. First, projects need to select models that match available fiscal resources. One project in particular has been unable to attract local funds to supplement the grant and has been unable to implement a model that is relatively expensive to operate. Another project generally has adequate resources but has been located in a vocational-technical school whose director has been insistent on maintaining close control over all activities in his school. He has been unwilling to make changes needed to accommodate the project model in such areas as adjustments in scheduling, provision of inservice support to teachers, or recognizing the authority of the project director to make and implement decisions regarding the project. Four of the projects, with the project director located in the state office and the sites widely scattered around the state, were unable to obtain status as a pilot project. As a consequence, local instructors hired for the projects could not obtain waivers necessary to provide instruction for which students could obtain credit toward graduation, and the concept of an alternative school had to be abandoned. Three of the projects revised their plans by offering pull-out tutorial services to students and some individualized career preparation/employability instruction. The fourth implemented a GED preparation program for dropouts. Further, owing in part to severe economic problems in the projects' locations, none was able to establish an entrepreneurial business, and only two were located in areas where students had access to any vocational education at all. Further, this problem has meant that participants have not been able to participate in work experience--there are no jobs available.

These illustrations suggest several lessons for localities intending to implement dropout prevention/reentry projects. First, in general it may be more feasible to expand existing projects or to implement a model with which the grantee has experience. Replication of one of the validated models, in the absence of experience with that model, will likely require an investment in capacity building and possibly in ongoing support for staff responsible for the project. Second, grantees need to have a good sense of the resources required, such that available resources match the requirements of the service configuration they intend to implement. Third, careful consideration of the local setting of the project is essential. For

example, planning for work experience as a major project component may be infeasible in locations with severe unemployment. Similarly, if state or district waivers are required for some project activities, formal agreements may be required as grant proposals are developed.[3]

- *What project components appear to facilitate or deter improved participant outcomes?*

One factor that had a strong effect on project implementation in the early phases of the demonstrations has to do with timing of the grant. Owing in part to the timing of the grant competitions, grantees had little time to engage in planning after they were notified of awards. In most instances, applicants are unable to undertake planning and implementation activities until award. Since both competitions awarded grants in the summer, after staff assignments for the upcoming school year had been made, a number of the grantees did not have a project director or a specified organizational location for the project. (In many instances, particularly in large urban school districts, the authors of the grant were located in a grant-writing division and were not the persons who would actually staff the project.) For some grantees, therefore, initiation of project activities was significantly delayed, in one instance for more than a year, after grant award. One implication of this factor is that often the individuals who end up staffing the project may have little knowledge of the project design and have to hire staff, learn the model, work out operational relationships with participating schools, recruit and admit students, and solve myriad logistical problems in a very short period. The projects we visited that were successful in their early phases avoided this difficulties in one of two ways: either they factored in a planning period, often the first semester of the grant, or they were able to dedicate a project director on the chance that they would be awarded a grant. Since the latter is not feasible in many localities, inclusion of a planning period in the schedule appears to be critical in effective project implementation.

In some instances, apparently minor aspects of project implementation can have an unexpected effect on project success. For example, in one district with two project sites, one

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[3]We recognize that prior planning, however useful, is not always possible. One project, whose service model relies on field trips to local area businesses as part of the career development component, had to drop this activity when the district changed its policies regarding transporting students during school hours. Participants perceived that something had been taken away from them, and the resulting morale problems were an issue for project staff.

of the components planned for the projects was proactive attendance monitoring, and an individual was hired to check on students on a daily basis, including visiting classes, counseling students, and telephoning and visiting parents. While this person was responsible for both sites, she was located at one of the sites and resides in the community in which most of that site's participants live. Predictably, most of her efforts have focused on that school, and the study's outcome analyses have shown significant improvement in attendance for those participants. Also predictably, the other site has not shown similar improvement; further, staff at the second site have expressed displeasure over their lack of access to this support service.

Finally, as implementation research has consistently demonstrated, capability, creativity, and commitment on the part of project staff are key to project success. To illustrate, the director of a project located in a community characterized by severe economic and employment problems has devised a particularly creative solution to the project's planned work experience component. She has developed a culturally sensitive career development curriculum and has arranged for her reentering participants to gain work experience by working for a local foundation that has a grant to record oral history from elders in the community. This strategy has significantly improved participants' attendance, self-esteem, and sense of prospects for the future.

Plans for Continuing Investigation

The final report on the implementation component for the SDDAP evaluation is currently under review, but the CDP longitudinal implementation study will continue to assess project implementation, and its influence on participant outcomes, for another 18 months. The work we are conducting will continue to investigate changes over time in factors that affect project implementation, and our analyses will focus on associations between the level and quality of implementation and the effects that these projects achieve in terms of improvements in participants' educational experiences and outcomes.